

Interview with Luis Peris
Tuesday, October 8 '02
_at the office of van Dijk Westlake Reed Leskosky

*Try to imagine, if you will, the amount of enthusiasm this gentleman has for his culture, as well as the city of Cleveland.

Can you tell me a little bit about yourself? For instance, where you work, live, where you were born, your ethnic roots.

My name is Luis Peris. I was born in Caracas, Venezuela. I moved to Cleveland about 20 years ago (20 and like 9 months or so). It's quite a different climate, culture, everything. I am currently living in Cleveland Heights, 3041 Essex. It's a beautiful street and a nice neighborhood. I really enjoy how it is integrated. I've live in several cities within Cleveland and I do feel very at home in Cleveland Heights because of the integration issue, and the location is also great with all the cultural institutions nearby. Currently I'm project director at van Dijk Westlake Reed Leskosky. I am both an architect and an engineer. So, that gives me a little bit of an upper hand with some projects. I enjoy the work I do. I recently finished one project in Cleveland. It was the Nautica Pavilion... for the House of Blues, and its actually probably one of my bigger profile projects in town. I was pretty happy and Jane Campbell was very nice... "Oh, it's a great contribution to the skyline..." It is fun to be a part of the city. I've moved away a few times and I always keep coming back. So, a few years ago I decided I am going to stay here and purchase property, and kind of started my own roots here in Cleveland. That's when I started also to be aware of my environment from a different point of view, as a Clevelander. Well, where are my roots other than my house? And that's where the Cultural Gardens came about.

How and when did you come to be involved with the prospect/development of a Hispanic Cultural Garden? Who initiated the process?

It started about five years ago when I was commuting downtown from the Heights, and on a nice day I like to take Martin Luther King Boulevard to the shore way. I call it the scenic route. If I'm on time and I have five minutes to spare. I really enjoy it. It's a beautiful beautiful drive. I have always enjoyed it since I've been in Cleveland. Practicing architecture, you start noticing some of the architectural elements. I've always enjoyed the old houses and the restored churches. I sadly see some beautiful houses being torn down and things like that. And I started noticing these gardens that were in a sad state of neglect to some degree or another. A few of them are actually quite well maintained, some of the sculptures, and you could see people working on them. Then a few years back there was a new [signed] package for the Cultural Gardens, and I thought this was a definite improvement. Then the bike path came to be, and then there was people using the bike path. Imagine that! So all of a sudden I realized that his was not a dead park. Its starting to awaken and the gardens were starting to awaken... and where's the Hispanic Garden?! There's a missing piece here. I am a part of Cleveland. I settled in Cleveland but there's no representation yet of a large community [Hispanic],

not just me. I am speaking as the representative. So when I started to inquire, I called friends. Melanie [Ferita] for Cleveland Public Art suggested names and more names. After knocking at enough doors and talking to enough people it starts to really become a reality, and I'm very happy with that.

- Who initiated?

I'm sure there have been other people before me, but I'm initiating the current version of it.

What does the word "Hispanic" mean in terms of the garden? For instance, what countries are included/excluded and why?

Yeah, that's a very very tricky question in that the African American garden and the Hispanic garden are representations of a whole culture that is made up of many political entities. How do you take 27 plus countries (depending on what day you read the newspaper) because political boundaries to some degree are arbitrary. We base it on geography, but countries do change as we know, but the culture hasn't. And that's what is really interesting. We are fragmented, but we're still one, and we can speak with one voice, and that's what I'm basing my concept off of...having one Hispanic garden as opposed to many country based gardens. Plus, I think we can get more punch anyways if we join forces. And actually at one point I even thought of talking to the American Indian representatives, and even the African American representatives because the Hispanic culture does have a continental European/Spanish background with a strong African influence and a very strong American Indian influence. So, its actually quite connected, all the cultures. We're still people and we all come from some common base at one point or another.

Why is it important to you to have a Hispanic Cultural Garden and be a part of that?

I think there needs to be a representation for a culture, that it's alive and thriving in a place. As I was driving down the park many times I thought, "You know there really ought to be a park where we can gather and we can have our wedding pictures taken and our grandmas can come and tell stories to the kids, and it's a little bit of our culture. I think in the last few decades Cleveland is starting to have a better defined Hispanic population and more representation throughout all the different trades and professions. So, I think it's just the right time.

Where is the Hispanic Cultural Garden in terms of the development process?

We're developing concepts; I'm still talking with the different Hispanic groups... The Hispanic Business Association, the Julio [Borgas] Cultural Center, HPAC, etc etc, some cultural organizations that aren't necessarily Hispanic like the Cleveland Public Art. But we are a part of the public art and environment creation process and the city. Looking into land appropriation... I don't know if you are aware how land is...It's really the city of Cleveland's property but then it becomes part of the Cultural Organization. In this

case a specific garden property while its developed, and then there's a giving back to the city. So, it's a whole political series of steps that are necessary. Right now I feel sometimes like I'm just in the tip of the iceberg. But my goal is that by next fall we would have the garden already. Truthfully, I want to have the groundbreaking in the spring, perhaps gather some important role models of the Hispanic community in Cleveland to show that we can come together for a joint celebration and also help fundraising I'm sure. And then by next fall already have it be a reality.

What have you found to be major obstacles in the process?

DID I SAY POLITICS? It's really not the governmental entities but some of the cultural politics. I was talking to a grouping particular, and I won't mention names, but they thought they didn't need a Hispanic Garden but rather a Puerto Rican Garden. Well, then I'm out because then it's really not inclusive of the culture. Then it becomes a political garden, or a country or a political boundaries garden. Somebody else said "Oh no we shouldn't have Spain. They treated the Natives real bad. We shouldn't have Spanish". No, it's going to be all or its probably not going to be able to survive because we are one. I cannot take away the Spanish part of me, and just have a garden for the rest of me. So, that's been one of the issues, fighting common ground. I was expecting it. Anytime there's a big public effort like that. I experience it everyday in architecture. Buildings have an impact on lot of people and not everyone is going to like the same things. So, I guess I'm already broken into the methodology of not being able to please everybody. But if I'm able to please everybody a little bit then at least we can do something good.

What can you tell me about the design and the content of the garden?

- Also where exactly it will be located

Since we don't have a plot there's not a formal final design yet. There's a design concept. The primary part of it being what we call ambassadors. Even though there is not 27 plus gardens we would like to acknowledge different countries. Those are people's roots. We all come from somewhere. The concept was to also create and celebrate the diversity. So, by creating ambassadors, which I imagine, and this is still in the design guidelines stage than the actual construction part of it, but coming up with a concept like a stone that's 18"x18"x18" cube. On this each country can carve with some native symbolism like Mayan hieroglyphs or contemporary elements, both graphic and writing. But something that is a true representation of that country or particular culture and then having it carved of stone that is from that country. Essentially having it carved at the different countries and being brought in. So that if I was from Guatemala I can bring my kids and they can see a little piece of Guatemala. Because of the geography I'm sure most of the planting, the landscape elements from tropical countries, for example, would never survive the Cleveland winters. But a stone, a carving, it's a piece of art, which is a piece of culture. Being from that country I think it would really touch home for those who are from that country, and then we will use local landscaping. The planting has to be hearty and beautiful enough that will do well here. But that's the main concept. The

arrangement of it is still going to be somewhat defined by the particular plot we are allocated.

What relevance do you think the Cultural Gardens has in today's society? Within the Hispanic community? Within the city of Cleveland?

Especially with the current political developments worldwide it's evermore important. It's almost mandatory that we need to be aware of what's around us, who they are. And not just see the bad part of other people. It's the culture, the joy, again, the wedding pictures, the grandmas and the two, three, four generations together, and they look like they are different. Like "She's a really tall blonde and this guy's darker, but we still share a human quality.

- Hispanic Community? City of Cleveland?

Sure, it's almost like a micro level rather than the world macro level. Within the Hispanic countries there are differences and sometimes [rifts], and especially with some of the political elements there is antagonism. And I think it would be a very good reminder that we are still one culture and we're still together, and we can tackle problems together.

Side Questions

He had mentioned talking to some of the Native Indian representatives, as well as those of the African American community. Did you find a collaborative effort there?

I certainly found a welcoming statement but because of the different states of progress there was not much of collaborative... They already have a land plot and design, but since we don't have a plot, who knows, maybe we can get our plot nearby and perhaps they are different gardens but you can easily walk from one to the other as a symbolic bridging so to speak of.

Specific process or steps?

It was a matter of contacting the right people and being contacted. Currently the Cleveland Cultural Federation is working on a series of guidelines that will aid in any future efforts and it's necessary not only to ensure consistency within Gardens. After all we're supposed to be working together not competing against each other, and certain things are tasteful and certain things aren't. It will also aid the new groups that would like to join the gardens. It also helped a lot talking to the representatives of other gardens and to hear what they had been through and are currently going through. So, there was a casual guideline if you just go to the right people they will tell you the steps they had to [go through].

Any final comments?

He just wanted to express his joy in contacting different members of the Hispanic community. The idea has been welcomed. Everyone is enthusiastic and it's very important to the Hispanic community.